New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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Theatre Openings

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Little Blue Light"

New York Post

April 30, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Melancholy Future for America

Edmund Wilson's "The Little Blue Light," which was offered at the ANTA Playhouse last night, is a kind of disorderly dramatic grab-bag, containing the brilliant critic's gloomy reflections on politics, pressure groups, the decline of American democracy, sex, the future, horror stories, and various other manifestations of world decline. Because Mr. Wilson has a lively and pungent mind, the fruits of his melancholy meditations result in a theatrical oddity of curiously provocative interest for a great deal of the time, even though his drama runs off in so many directions at once that it loses most of its final effectiveness.

It is much at its best when it is contemplating the ugly political future of this country, which Mr. Wilson sees dominated by social and religious pressure organizations, with old-school American liberalism and belief in freedom of speech putting up a losing fight under the leadership of a baffled magazine editor. Being a political observer with vigorous and highly articulate opinions the critic turned playwright has interesting things to say about the fairly immediate future and he says them entertainingly. He is a little less effective when he turns to melodrama, and decidedly at his weakest, surprisingly enough, when he gets to sex.

Comparisons

When "The Little Blue Light" appeared in book form a year ago, its publishers described it as a combination of Mr. Wilson's notorious "Hecate County," George Orwell's chilling "1984" and the incomparable horror cartoons of Charles Addams. Granted the natural exaggeration of the blurb-writer, the comparisons are fairly accurate. At least, it deals with a future in which liberty and free speech have virtually disappeared, presents a husband and wife enmeshed in neurotic sex difficulties, and introduces an author who specializes in monsters and terrors. There is also a symbolic character who turns out to be the Wandering Jew.

Although the editor seems a rather weak reed for American liberalism to be leaning on, his fight against totalitarian opposition, headed by a mysterious and sinister Greek, does have a certain chilling effectiveness. I thought, however, that the interest almost entirely disappeared when the editor and his wife went in for their battle of the sexes. The blue light of the title, by the way, is a homicidal device that explodes and kills people when it has been set off by the angry passions of its victims. It is, of course, as symbolic as that mysterious gardener, whose accent is Italian in the first scene, Irish in the second, Scotch in the third and Russian in the fourth.

Improvement

If "The Little Blue Light" is, in the main, a baffling drama, it is not because what it is saying is particularly obscure or confused. It is merely because Mr. Wilson tosses in his interesting ideas without bothering about organizing them in properly efficient terms of the theater. Yet I must confess that the play seemed considerably more effective last night than it did when I read it last summer. For one thing, it has been edited a bit. More importantly, Burgess Meredith has the time of his life playing the absurd author of the horror tales, and he makes the peculiar fellow richly and extravagantly comic.

Although Mr. Meredith's performance is the most entertaining of the evening, the other players are likewise excellent. Melvyn Douglas is vigorous as the editor, Arlene Francis brings clarity and intelligence to the trying role of the wife, Peter Cookson plays the editor's dubious assistant ably, and Martin Gabel is particularly good in giving eloquence and a bit of sense to the character of the symbolic gardener, a role that might easily have reduced the entire play to silliness. It is always interesting to listen to Mr. Wilson's ideas, but it is exasperating to find him wasting them in a chaotic narrative.

"THE LITTLE BLUE LIGHT"

Play by Edmund Wilson; staged by Albert Marre; settings by Lester Polakov; costumes by Robert Fletcher; presented by Quintus Productions for the American National Theatre and Academy at the ANTA Playhouse, April 29, 1951. The cast:

The Gardner.....Martin Gabel
Judith.....Arlene Francis
Gandersheim..Burgess Meredith
Frank.....Melvyn Douglas
Ellis.....Peter Cookson

Synopsis: A country house about an hour and a half from New York. Time: The not-remote future. Part I. Scene 1. The garden. Mid-September, late afternoon. Scene 2. Workroom on the second floor. Mid-October, late afternoon. Part II. Scene 1. The same room. Early December, 11 o'clock in the morning. Scene 2. The same room. The day before Christmas, late afternoon.

DAILY NEWS

April 30, 1951

Wilson's 'The Little Blue Light' An Original, Provocative Drama

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There is more individuality and originality in Edmund Wilson's "The Little Blue Light" than in any other play of the season, including Christopher Fry's souped-up verse, "The Lady's not for Burning." It is being played by an excellent company of four men and one woman at the ANTA Playhouse, and I recommend it. But I should warn you that it is practically all talk—intelligent talk, which is an art form that is sometimes shunned by entertainment seekers.

Mr. Wilson, an essayist, a writer of memoirs and a literary critic, has fashioned a play which is not machine-made to follow the accepted pattern of the stage. He has put five people together on a stage and has then sat back, with rather cynical interest, to see what might develop if they were let alone. Very rarely does he interrupt them by suggesting that they do something in order to make a plot. There is a plot, and there is some suspense and excitement in "The Little Blue Light," but the structure of the play is not its most important element.

Talking Never Hurts.

What is important is that Mr. Wilson has some ideas and opinions—and has found some very good spokesmen for these notions and beliefs in Burgess Meredith, Melvyn Douglas, Arlene Francis, Martin Gabel and Peter Cookson. I wouldn't go so far as to say he is a modern Bernard Shaw, but he seems to think as Shaw did—that a little intelligent conversation wouldn't hurt the stage a bit. In these days this is a novelty.

The time of "The Little Blue Light" is the not too distant future. This country has proceeded along the lines Mr. Wilson thinks have been drawn for it, and now in this future time there is little freedom. The rulers are those who would suppress or repress; pressure groups of all kinds, including the church, have reached their greatest power. As Mr. Douglas explains the situation in an early scene, the Communists have become the extreme right in politics, holding as they do to their vast conservatism; and those on the left—the real radicals—are the Constitutionalists, who would like to revive the exercise of the Bill of Rights.

It's a Funny Play.

I'm sorry if the foregoing paragraph sounds weighty; it's my fault, not Wilson's. For all its seriousness of outlook, "The Little Blue Light" is witty and funny. Mr. Meredith is giving a grand and devilish performance as an aesthetic, intelligent and right-minded pansy. Opposite him in character is Mr. Douglas, playing a driving, clear-thinking and courageous magazine editor.

The drama takes place in an old country house (the architect may have been Charles Addams) in which Douglas edits and runs his magazine. His staff includes his petulant, discontented wife, Miss Francis, and a smooth assistant, Mr. Cookson. There is a gardener, Mr. Gabel, who talks in Italian, Irish or Scottish dialects according to his mood. He is a man of mystery, and just who he is and what he stands for makes an interesting ending for this interesting play.

Sinister forces are at work—forces that have all but seized control of the country by the simple and peaceful means of giving people job security. Mr. Douglas is about to expose the head of the movement—a fellow who did nothing worse than run an employment agency—and he is marked for elimination by the newest thing in weapons. It is a little blue light, which, when the victim becomes angry enough, electrocutes him.

You might like this play as much as I do.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
April 30, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

Casts Some Shadows

THE ninth offering in the ANTA series is a new script by Edmund Wilson presenting a literate but discursive melodrama in a pessimistic vision of the immediate future. In dealing with the moral choices of a magazine publisher at a period one guesses to be about 1960, "The Little Blue Light" paints a gloomy picture of a warped world in broad and significant strokes. Full of nameless social evil whose presence is felt in the trenchant observations of the dialogue, it is strong in mood but aloof and inhuman in style. It touches life in the performance of Burgess Meredith as an effete writer and globe-trotter, but elsewhere it is hazed over with symbolism and generalization, charging the atmosphere with words but never quite letting loose with palpable dramatic effects.

* * *

Wilson sees the America of "the not-remote future" as cloven politically along pressure-group rather than ideological lines with "The Reds," "The sons of Feter" and "The Yankee elite-ists" as the three most powerful influences. His setting is a country house not far from New York where a publisher is trying to defend his own little island of objective and honest journalism. The plot concerns the rise of a fourth powerful pressure group secretly making a bid for leadership against the existing economic, religious and Fascist cliques. This is a provocative theme, this future history in which organized cynical pragmatism grows into an enemy more dangerous than the imaginary corruptions of present forces. It is arranged into an interesting argument in Wilson's script, but it is unwieldy material for a play with these sweeping villainies and symptomatic reactions.

* * *

The characters are a set of symbols in which the Wandering Jew is the clearest and the publisher's wife, a confused and irritable female, the vaguest. Melvyn Douglas incriminates the world as he explains it in his role of the magazine owner, an outspoken and courageous fellow who represents an old, or present-time democratic rock in a sea of partialities. His acting is forceful, but not quite so telling as that of Meredith as an esthete who writes fictional horror stories and throws up his hands in a feminine gesture of terror when he faces reality. His role is less typical and more individually recognizable than the others, and Meredith adds to its color with a collection of lace-fringed mannerisms and delicate moldings of speech that personalize it beyond its broader significance as a neuter position among positive attitudes.

* * *

Arlene Francis is the wife who is troubled by dim fears and longings, and Peter Cookson plays a polite young man who finds a purpose in the new form of organized slavery. Martin Gabel is a gardener who philosophizes in many accents as he watches the slow destruction of these people, and who speaks an impassioned epilogue after the melodrama is over. Albert Marre's direction keeps the actors moving about logically as they exchange their complicated views, and Lester Polakov's sets representing parts of the house and its grounds reflect the mood admirably. There is a certain fund of intellectual terror in "The Little Blue Light," along with some suspense. Dealing for the most part with the general rather than with the particular, it is intelligent but remote and therefore not quite able to establish a strong contact across its footlights.

The New York Times
April 30, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Edmund Wilson is preoccupied with serious ideas, he has written a play of serious ideas, "The Little Blue Light," which had its official opening at the Anta Playhouse last evening. If it were not for the Anta series, "The Little Blue Light" would probably never have a professional Broadway opening, particularly with a cast led by Burgess Meredith, Melvyn Douglas and Arlene Francis. For we might as well face the fact that Mr. Wilson's ideas are disembodied and that he has no more talent for the stage than Henry James. Although "The Little Blue Light" looks like a play and sounds like a play, it has no feet, hands or heart and no theatrical substance.

But it is good to have a place in New York where a man of Mr. Wilson's earnestness can try on the theatre for size. Like many other responsible thinkers, he is worried about the future. He has set his play in "the not-remote future" when the Reds are the party of the right and men are naturally gravitating into organized power groups to control the world for its own good.

His central figure is the crusading editor of a liberal magazine who is resisting power groups from all directions. He can identify and fight most of them. But the one that really shakes him is a secret organization led by a disillusioned Greek immigrant who founds an employment agency. It is the best employment agency in the country, and expands by logical means until it controls everything.

* * *

There is a great deal more to "The Little Blue Light" than that. Mr. Wilson has a full mind and he has emptied it with abandon. His drama involves feminism, psychiatry, the obsolescence of education, sexual aberration, a new method of murder by remote control and the Wandering Jew, who is the immutable moralist.

In the heat of writing for the theatre, Mr. Wilson has happily embraced romantic and melodramatic clichés that he would never dream of using in novels or articles. No one dotes on the theatre's mumbo-jumbo more than an intellectual who is trying to put ideas into dramatic form. J. B. Priestley being a good example of that, and Aldous Huxley being another. Serious people with brilliant minds often write on a lower level for the theatre than they do for the printed page.

"The Little Blue Light" is not only insubstantial but unreal and more and more confusing. Toward the end of the evening it is difficult to know who is fighting for what and why. Mr. Wilson presumably blows up the world in the last scene. Though not until his characters have made it no longer worth inhabiting.

* * *

If the performance is excellent, it follows that Mr. Wilson must have written characters that can be acted. Albert Marre's direction is versatile and animated; and Lester Polakov's two settings are first-rate work. Not for years has Burgess Meredith acted with so much freedom and candor as he does in the part of an over-civilized dilettante. Arlene Francis' moody, introverted modern wife is the finest characterization she has created for a long time; and Melvyn Douglas' strength and easy-humor give the crusading editor consistent validity.

Peter Cookson makes something personable and intelligible out of a rootless gentleman who finds security in someone else's tyranny. Martin Gabel has to play a symbolic character who speaks many languages and knows everything. He acquits himself creditably in a job that demands omnipotence. No one could act such a part on the terms Mr. Wilson has set for it.

For "The Little Blue Light" is a valiant attack on the theatre by a man with a hatful of ideas. With all proper respect for Mr. Wilson's intellectual vitality, the theatre's defenses are still formidable.

Journal-American
April 30, 1951

'Blue Light' Misses

By ROBERT GARLAND

Yesterday was, theatrically, ANTA Day on Fifty-second street. At its own playhouse! During the daylight hours, Blanche Yurka, the justly celebrated actress, held forth in the great roles she has ofttimes played. At night, Quintus Productions—Peter Cookson, Hume Cronyn Joe Magee, Martin Manulis and The Brattle Theatre of Cambridge, Massachusetts—held forth in Edmund Wilson's "The Little Blue Light."

I, happily present at both, understood Miss Yurka all along. She, with a few helpful words for us critics, let herself go with Aristophanes and Shakespeare, Moliere and Sheridan, Oscar Wilde and Maxwell Anderson. Personally, I know she did right by every one of them—including the Congreve I forgot to mention. Mr. Anderson alone did not do right by her. By comparison, he seemed distinctly outclassed.

As for "The Little Blue Light," that was as fascinating as it is between the covers of a book. That is fascinating indeed! With a cast only ANTA could afford, Mr. Wilson's serio-comic play is about Shidnats Slyme, the monster god—or Belial, Moloch, Kala, Nobodaddy or the back pages of The New Yorker! You identify him with anything. Or nothing. Maybe, come to think of it, it is bettter to identify him with ANTA.

That makes him sinister, as well as fascinating.

* * *

Cast Excellent

Edmund Wilson is, I think, as bright as any man I know. Certainly he is one of the brightest of writing men. His pieces are an education to a daily newspaper man. And, sometimes when it is and sometimes when it isn't, he calls a spade a spade. But I do wish I knew what he calls "The Little Blue Light" when it holds forth on 52d st. He doesn't label it.

Last night, it was fascinating

as done by the Quintus Productions, especially by Burgess Meredith as the Gandershein who, among other things and people, is Ganvoort Von. I don't know, I can't remember, when one of our better actors has given a better performance. Unless it is Mr. Meredith's Marchbanks. That was with Katharine Cornell. It made sense, too.

"The Little Blue Light" is well acted by everyone, by Melvyn Douglas, Arlene Francis, Martin Gabel, Peter Cookson as well as Mr. Meredith. But the others behave as if they were in on a secret, while Mr. Meredith doesn't seem to care. He, therefore, is most effective before Lester Polakov's decor and under Albert Mare's direction. The others seem surprised. Even Martin Gabel's Gardener, who is supposed to know. . .

If "The Little Blue Light" is a joke, it is no laughing matter!

Daily Mirror

April 30, 1951

'The Little Blue Light' Just a Dimout

By ROBERT COLEMAN

We braved a thunder and lightning storm last evening to witness "The Little Blue Light," which Quintus Productions presented at the ANTA Playhouse. But our bravery was really put to the test, once we arrived in West 52nd Street. It took a lot of courage indeed to sit through the two acts of the new arrival.

Edmund Wilson is reputed to be a literary critic of moment. It has been said that critics should not write plays. We began to disbelieve this saw after Wolcott Gibbs penned "Season in the Sun." But now we aren't so sure any more.

"The Little Blue Light" is a muddled mish-mash of philosophy, romance, melodrama, sex and symbolism. It has to do with a crusading magazine editor who lives in an eerie country house rented from a psychopathic sissy named Gandersheim. He is married to a girl whose father had killed her mother and then committed suicide. He met her while on a collegiate lecture tour.

His secretary is one Ellis, scion of an aristocratic family, who falls in love with the boss's wife and eventually joins a mysterious movement headed by Lou Teniakas. The latter had fought in the Greek resistance movement, and spurned the Reds because he was too independent to submit to discipline.

So Teniakas came to America and set up an organization in which he was the uncommon man acting on behalf of common men. He was compared by his disciples to Pericles and Andrew Jackson. To wipe out his adversaries, he used a flashlight which killed when selected victims became angry.

Well, the little blue light eventually destroyed the liberal editor, his unhappy wife and Gandersheim, who had become famous as the author of stories about a character named something like Schindheimer Slime, suggested by Miles Standish spelled backwards.

Unfortunately, it failed to hit a mopey Gardner in time to prevent him from inflicting a mystical epilogue on those trapped in the ANTA Playhouse.

Under the direction of Albert Marre, Melvyn Douglas, Burgess Meredith, Arlene Francis, Martin Gabel and Peter Cookson perform the Wilsonian balderdash in a manner that suggested to us that they might have been embarrassed by it all.

Meredith, particularly, seemed ill at ease, as the unsavory swish Gandersheim. He was quite a card in a pink shirt and a dressing gown with fish stenciled on the back. The ever reliable Gabel contributed the best acting of the evening as the gardener. He even achieved eloquence on occasion.

In our book "The Little Blue Light" is a pretentious bore, a woofled assault on the world as it is today. We wonder how much longer the master minds of the American National Theatre and Academy are going to give us such flubdub for $40 per seat a season? And they make us swallow it on Sunday nights yet. Enough is enough.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 30, 1951

'Blue Light' Takes Mental Voltage

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Type—Drama
Time—Future
Topic—Morality
I find it—Provocative

"The Little Blue Light" is stimulating and sometimes confusing. Both these qualities led last night's audience to constant comment during the performance, a poor idea.

The play needs attention. Real key passages are spasmodic. When they come, you had better hear them. If you do, the play is by no means as formidable as you might expect.

It is concerned with ideas, not plot. An outline of the narrative describes the canvas and ignores the paint. Briefly, however, it tells of the last fighting liberal's destruction. In a not too distant future, he publishes a magazine which battles against an infinite number of pressure groups.

Idealism Taunted.

He is finally destroyed by an esoteric movement operating as a universal employment bureau. It exists purely for the sake of organization and bulk power.

The publisher's wife is a neurotic woman who demands gallantry but refuses any real function, either as a woman or a working professional. She taunts her husband's idealistic aims, and plays around with his traitorous assistant.

They live in a house owned by an effeminate author of fantastic horror tales, who comes to work on the magazine. He achieves a symbolic vision of salvation, but lacks the force to use it.

Wandering Jew.

A gardener on the place switches nationality at will, as he tries to point out the dangers of their behaviour to the other characters. Eventually he is revealed as the Wandering Jew, who will always stand by, trying to help man, as one kind of morality after another fails.

The title refers to a symbolic element. At one time it would seem to signify Truth, which must be kept visible, at least partly by the imaginative recreation of life through Art.

"The Little Blue Light" is also hatred, a form of false truth, and as such is the power that destroys these characters.

Edmund Wilson has some lively argumentative ideas, mainly anti-organizational ones, about religion and politics. He also has some fairly interesting characters. I am not convinced, however, that he has material for a play.

Convincing Lead.

In the first place, this work is not dramatic, except at the very close. Neither is it intellectually melodramatic. It is rather ruminative and argumentative.

In the second place, the language is highly literate, but lacks any aural virtues. It speaks realistically of fantasy, and unhappy process. You feel talked at or read aloud to, rather than sonically moved.

Melvyn Douglas is most successful as the publisher. He gives the part physical ease and internal tenseness, in an entirely convincing manner. Burgess Meredith is arch as the writer, and Arlene Francis overcomes her normal healthy spirits to play the difficult wife. Martin Gabel has calm stature as the Wanderer, and Peter Cookson copes quietly with the treacherous subeditor.

"Gramercy Ghost"

Daily Mirror

April 27, 1951

'Gramercy Ghost' Fine —As Far as It Goes

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Roger Clark and Evan M. Frankel brought a pleasant, imaginative, but perhaps too brief, comedy called "Gramercy Ghost" to the Morosco Theatre last evening. Author John Cecil Holm started out with an interesting idea, but wasn't able to develop it as fully as he should.

The new arrival has to do with a bookish young lady who inherits a ghost from an elderly neighbor in Gramercy Park. The eerie fellow had tarried in a tavern while on the way to deliver an important message for Gen. Washington during the Revolutionary War, and thus not only failed in his mission, but met sudden death in the bargain. The irate Washington had prevented him from finding peace in the beyond, by way of punishment.

Only the literary young lady can see and converse with the spectre. This causes her stuffy fiance to try to have her committed to a sanitarium. But a nice young newspaperman believes her story, and finally finds a way to make the disturbing visitor vanish. Gratefully, the harassed heroine decides that their resourceful reporter is the right man for her to marry.

Comedies of the supernatural represent a challenge for a playwright, and Holm has met it remarkably well. He has managed the contrast between reality and unreality with skill. He has packed a lot of solid laughter into two acts, with a running time of only two hours. We feel the entertainment values might have been enhanced by a lengthier development of the characters and situations.

Reginald Denham's capable direction, and Raymond Sovey's setting are helpful.

Winston Churchill's attractive daughter, Sarah, is excellent as the baffled hostess to a wraith. Richard Waring is just the sort of ghost you'd like to have about the home if you had to put up with one. Robert Sterling is likable as the enterprising reporter, and Robert Smith properly dislikable as his pompous rival.

Mable Paige is amusing as a loyal domestic. Kirk Brown is good as a cop facing a nervous breakdown from overwork. And Harry Sothern does all possible as an eccentric lawyer.

"Gramercy Ghost" will inevitably be compared with "Bell, Book and Candle," as both deal with the supernatural. And, frankly, we think the former suffers in the comparison. When it comes to handling spirits, Lilli Palmer, Rex Harrison and John Van Druten have no peers. They overpower them with sheer charm.

"Gramercy Ghost," it should be reported, drew appreciative laughter and applause from the first-nighters. Your drama sampler garnered quite a few chuckles from it, too. But he left the Morosco with the impression that he should have gotten more.

"GRAMERCY GHOST"

Comedy by John Cecil Holm; staged by Reginald Denham; settings by Raymond Sovey; presented by Roger Clark in association with Evan M. Frankel at the Morosco Theatre, April 26, 1951. The cast:

Margaret Collins. . Mabel Paige
Nancy Willard. . Sarah Churchill
Parker Burnett. . . Robert Smith
Luther Ames. . . . Harry Sothern
Charley Stewart. . Robert Sterling
Nathaniel Coombes. . . . . Richard Waring
Officer Morrison. . . Kirk Brown
Irv. . . . . Harry Townes
Rocky. . . . . Mitchell Kowal
Ambulance Driver. . John Marley
Assistant Driver. . Charles Boaz

Synopsis: The action takes place within 24 hours in the living room of Nancy Willard's apartment in Gramercy Park, New York City. Act I, A late afternoon in spring. Act II, Scene 1, After midnight. Scene 2, A few hours later.

New York Post

April 27, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Phantom of Gramercy Park

"Gramercy Ghost," which opened at the Morosco Theater last night, is a comedy about a girl who inherits the ghost of a Revolutionary soldier. The poor fellow had been killed in what is now Gramercy Park and he isn't allowed to go to Heaven because George Washington suspected him of being a traitor. He causes the girl a lot of trouble but finally helps her to drop her pompous fiance and marry a dashing young newspaperman, if that isn't a redundancy. It is a harmless but oddly tedious little play that arouses a minimum of hilarity.

This might be enough to report of the new comedy, because it seems rather a high-school antic and there isn't a great deal more to be said of it than that it is a curiously amateurish offering for the Broadway trade. But, for several extraneous reasons, a few other facts about it deserve to be noted. For one thing, it was written by John Cecil Holm, whose "Three Men on a Horse" was one of the famous hits of the American theater. For another, the leading role is played by Sarah Churchill, whose father is not unknown to world history.

Miss Churchill

Of the two chief reasons for the news interest in "Gramercy Ghost," the one whose contribution to the play is more valuable is Miss Churchill. I can't say that at this point of her career she is an actress of any vast distinction, but she is a distinctly pleasant performer, with quiet charm and easy humor and she makes the harried young woman, who keeps seeing and talking to a phantom invisible to the other people in the cast, real and engaging. It seems a shame that she is not having her local debut under happier circumstances.

As for Mr. Holm, he has hit upon a satisfactory enough idea for a comic fantasy, but he has brought to it neither a satisfactory sense of comedy nor an effective feeling for the fantastic. There must certainly be more fun and charm inherent in the conception of the adventures of the house ghost of one of the old Gramercy Park residences than can be found in this ramshackle fable. Such a tale demands a quality of imagination and humorous invention, and that is just the quality that Mr. Holm's play unhappily lacks.

Another possible cause for news interest in "Gramercy Ghost" is the fact that the newspaperman-hero is played by a prominent movie leading man named Robert Sterling. On Mr. Sterling's behalf, it can be said that his playing is modest and inoffensive, but I can't go on to add that his performance gives any comfort to the belief that a film actor is automatically equipped to be a stage star. Incidentally, you can tell that Mr. Sterling is the hero because he believes in Miss Churchill's ghost, while her churlish sweetheart thinks she's nuts.

The title role is played by Richard Waring, who once gave such a fine performance opposite Ethel Barrymore in "The Corn Is Green." Mr. Waring has a chance to swagger about with romantic humor, but I thought his part indicated that a phantom can also be something of a garrulous bore. Robert Smith is the fellow who is all for sending the haunted girl off to a psychopathic ward, and Kirk Brown plays a policeman who gets hit on the head with a whiskey bottle. There are also a couple of minor ghosts for good measure. But the evening offers scant fun.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 27, 1951

Spirited Triangle In 'Gramercy Ghost'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The title "Gramercy Ghost" is an unusually informative one. When you figure that young love in the quiet atmosphere of the downtown residential square is interrupted by Revolutionary remnants, you pretty much know what the comedy is.

There are a good many laughs along its course, and although its mood changes sharply every once in a while, it never trends toward farce or delicate pathos with any great determination.

Ghost Talk.

The basic source of laughs is that fairly familiar situation of having one character see and talk to intangible spirits which are apparent to nobody else. Naturally the conflict then has to be the result of the other characters taking sides as to whether the leading character is mentally unsound or plagued by real ghosts.

A young reader in a publisher's office, she is engaged to marry a stuffy broker, when her landlady suddenly dies and bequeaths her a spirit. He is a Revolutionary soldier, stamped a traitor for never having delivered a message.

If the soldier can complete his mission, he can move on to Heaven. Meanwhile, he hangs around Gramercy Square where he was shot, and currently falls in love with the play's heroine.

Rivals Three.

A newspaper reporter comes into the picture, seeking a story about the deceased, and shortly becomes the rival of the broker and the ghostly soldier for the heroine's affections.

As a young lady on the sidewalk after the final curtain remarked, "It's a perfectly good evening's entertainment, but it sure isn't anything to stick with you."

That just about hits the ghost on the head. The play is generally amusing, if never hilarious or touching. And when it is resolved, coincidences settle the problems. Meanwhile, it gets pretty talky between bursts of laugh-getting or story spinning.

Graceful Actress.

The show marks the Broadway debut of Sarah Churchill, daughter of the former British Prime Minister. She turns out to be an extremely attractive and graceful actress who moves through the intermittent fantasy with aplomb, and just the appropriate amount of taking it seriously.

Robert Sterling plays the reporter with a commendable air of laughing with the play. He has charm and assurance, and here makes his local legitimate debut with fine effect after a long term in pictures.

Richard Waring is properly evasive and detached as the ghost, and Mabel Paige gives the play some of its most charming touches with her flouncy housekeeper.

Journal American

April 27, 1951

An Entertaining Story And You May Like It

By ROBERT GARLAND

There's a peculiar setup in John Cecil Holm's new play. Sarah Churchill is a star. Robert Sterling is another. Richard Waring is a featured player. So is Mabel Paige. Miss Churchill is renowned as her father's daughter. Mr. Sterling is not renowned at all. Mr. Waring was in "The Corn Is Green." Miss Paige was in "Two Blind Mice."

And now, as of last night at the Morosco, they're all together in "Gramercy Ghost." It's an entertaining little ghost-story and you'll not be sorry if you go to see it. Richard Waring is the leading larva, held over from the American Revolution, a phantom protege of Gen. Washington. There are two minor spooks, eerie afterthoughts.

These carry on the phantomic tradition revived by Noel Coward in "Blithe Spirit." And Sarah Churchill as Nancy Willard, Robert Sterling as Charley Steward and Mabel Paige as Margaret Collins are their flesh-and-blood fellow Gramercy Parkians. Robert Smith is a society gentleman-caller who loves Miss Churchill.

He loves her not too well, but wisely. The way to her heart — in the play, I mean — is through liquor. Straight liquor, not even on the rocks.

* * *

Nice Time

John Cecil Holm, who was the sole author of "Three Men on a Horse" before George Abbott saw it, has stirred these into a play in which he, himself, acted in 1947. In New York's Germantown. Now, on Broadway, Mr. Holm is out of it and the stars and featured-players are in. They had a nice enough time last night.

So did we. Under the direction of Reginald Denham, against a background by Raymond Sovey, the on-stage Gramercy Parkians saw and did not see ghosts with the greatest of ease. The off-stage first-night audience enjoyed their seeing and not seeing. Especially the seeing. Richard Waring, as Nathaniel Coombes, is responsible.

He is responsible for the ghostly, but not-too-ghostly, ghost that Nathaniel Coombes remains. For he is like the ghost of Lenora Corbett—or was it Peggy Wood? —in Mr. Coward's fashion-setting farce which opened at the same playhouse. He is an apparition with good manners, consideration and a sense of humor.

He holds the piece together. Were it not for Mr. Waring merely featured though he be, "Gramercy Ghost" would be something else again.

* * *

Severe Charm

Sarah Churchill, making her first Broadway appearance, plays Nancy Willard with severe charm. Having seen her in Princeton as Tracy Lord in "The Philadelphia Story" a year or so ago, I am surprised and gratified at the softening of her English accent. Now she sounds like a Bostonian who has gone to school in England.

Robert Sterling, her fellow star, is also facing his first Broadway audience at the Morosco. He has, according to the program, been in moving-pictures and will shortly make a success when the new "Showboat" comes onto a screen. He is likeable in "Gramercy Ghost" and isn't rudely called upon to act.

But Richard Waring and Mabel Paige act. He as Nathaniel Coombes, the ghost of the title. She as Margaret Collins, who never really sees him. And as Officer Morrison, who gets crowned with a whisky bottle, Kirk Brown knows his way around. And he is not startled when a New York newspaper man buys the drinks.

Although no "must" on your theatre-going calendar, "Gramercy Ghost" is a "you-may-like-it." And don't be afraid of Sarah Churchill. Richard Waring really is the star.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

April 27, 1951

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY Jr.

Rather Ghastly

A SPOOK crawls along the carpets of a New York house in "Gramercy Ghost,' a new comedy as unsubstantial as the ghost himself. This play by John Cecil Holm imagines a Revolutionary War soldier trapped in time and in Gramercy Park because he forgot his duty in an idyll with a buxom barmaid. The effect of his presence upon a set of modern characters includes a lot of speculation upon who is or is not crazy, along with the usual discussion of who is or is not in love with whom. It is all very whimsical, very thin, and not, on the whole, more than occasionally funny.

* * *

As the only character who can see and talk to the ghost, Sarah Churchill is the center of all reaction. Her acting is a bit too definite for farce, but she maintains an attractive poise through the frantic involvements in which she must keep a snob, a newspaper man and a luminous footsoldier at arm's length. Reginald Denham's direction pretends to a strong comic situation with double-takes, hastily-gulped drinks, exhausted protests and the like. But comedy is only an apparition in this play, whose mechanical romantic contest is not much enhanced simply because one of the suitors can walk through walls.

* * *

Richard Waring plays the ghost archly, and Mabel Paige gets in a lot of properly flighty or haughty gestures as an elderly maid. Robert Smith is a Harvard fiance whose first thought is to call for a straitjacket; Robert Sterling is the journalist who is willing to grab the girl, hallucinations and all, and there is a supporting cast of city officials and hazy emissaries from George Washington. "Gramercy Park" is in short supply of both fantasy and romantic frivolity, and the meager rations gain very little from each other in this combination.

The New York Times

April 27, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

To judge by the cheerfulness of the Morosco audience last evening, people who are delighted by ghost stories like "Gramercy Ghost," which brought Sarah Churchill to the neighborhood for her New York debut. Despite her exalted family connections, Miss Churchill is an intelligent and animated actress who can act a part like a professional, as her father does in his business, too.

But this is going to be an unappreciative notice of John Cecil Holm's comic tale of the supernatural. Although your correspondent is entranced with everything else about Gramercy Park, he is unfortunately unable to believe in its shades and wraiths. Mr. Holm, the cherished author of "Three Men on a Horse," has written a comedy about a ghost of the Revolutionary War who has been condemned to haunt the Gramercy area ever since and has the good taste to fall in love with one of the contemporary residents.

* * *

She can see him and talk with him, although he is invisible and inaudible to everyone else; but there are a couple of other Revolutionary ghosts whom she cannot see or hear. This naturally involves a number of awkward situations, including a Gramercy Park suspicion that she is unhinged. Many, and perhaps most, of the playgoers last evening found the changing situations amusing.

Although it is always bad manners to be the death's head at a feast, this playgoer is bound to confess that the situations seemed mechanical to him, and the "Gramercy Ghost," a dull play. There was real wit in Noel Coward's "Blithe Spirit," which used a ghost to make a satirical point. There is real humor in John van Druten's "Bell, Book and Candle," which has some gusto in it, to say nothing of Lilli Palmer and Rex Harrison. But Mr. Holm's plot is hardly more than a slide-rule exercise and his dialogue is pedestrian.

* * *

Reginald Denham's direction may be partly responsible for the impression the comedy makes. The direction is literal, too: it has no gaiety or wit in it. As the haunted lady of Gramercy, Miss Churchill gives an adroit and mettlesome performance in a genuine comic style. Richard Waring plays the ghost with a pleasant sense of humor. As two rival suitors for the lady's hand, Robert Sterling and Robert Smith are as good as their parts. And so are Mabel Paige as an old family servant, and Kirk Brown as a cynical Gotham cop.

* * *

Raymond Sovey has provided a beautifully antique living-room with carved woodwork and attractive lighting. Everything is well done except Mr. Holm's manuscript, which is elementary theatre work. Or, so it seems to one who is not enchanted by his supernatural hocus-pocus.

DAILY NEWS

April 27, 1951

Sarah Churchill Inherits a Spook In Cecil Holm's 'Gramercy Ghost'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Sarah Churchill, daughter of Britain's Winston, is considerably perturbed by an enemy of King George who adores her in "Gramercy Ghost," which had its premiere last evening at the Morosco Theatre. It's nothing for the State Department to look into, though—I guess it isn't, anyway, even though the State Department gets curiouser and curiouser—because this unwelcome suitor is an enemy of King George No. III, who is no longer alive.

As a matter of fact, neither is the suitor alive. He got shot in 1776 while fighting for our side and was condemned to haunt a house on Gramercy Park until he has finished the mission he started on—an errand for Gen. Washington which was interrupted when he got taken dead. This swain, as impersonated by Richard Waring, looks much younger than his 209 years (he was 34 at the time of the shooting). Younger, even, than some of my friends who frequent Nos. 15 and 16 Gramercy Park.

It Goes With the House.

John Cecil Holm, the author of "Gramercy Ghost," has devised an amiable play about a girl who lives on Gramercy Park and has just been willed the ghost that goes with the house. As soon as the spectre becomes her property she can see him and hear him, but nobody else can. This obviously leads people to think she is off her rocker.

It's rather a short comedy, but even so there is time to straighten out Miss Churchill's real-life romances. She properly decides not to marry Robert Smith, who plays a stuffed-shirt Wall Streeter, and transfers her affections—as any sensible girl would do—to Robert Sterling, a newspaper reporter who has a $92 tab in a Greenwich Village saloon. There is nothing quite like being married to a newspaperman. Ask the woman who owns one.

Miss Churchill is an attractive and competent actress. Mr. Sterling, from the movies, is engaging as the journalist, and Mr. Smith is amusing as the Wall Streeter. Mr. Waring's performance as the haunt has nice humor, and the smaller roles are well played by Mabel Paige, Harry Sothern, Kirk Brown and others. Reginald Denham directed and the Gramercy Park house has been designed by Raymond Sovey.

"The Taming of the Shrew"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

April 26, 1951

'Taming of the Shrew' Turns Porteresque

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The City Center's revival of "The Taming of the Shrew" settles an interesting point that has puzzled a good many people. To anyone who has seen "Kiss Me, Kate," and by now that must mean just about everybody, Shakespeare seems to be constantly quoting Cole Porter.

In fact, Margaret Webster has anticipated this effect by having a couple of characters hum strains of Porter tunes.

Such an innovation is typical of the rambunctious nature of the production. The incidents of the taming of Katherina by Petruchio are framed in the business of the drunken Sly being tricked into thinking he dreams the whole play.

Two-Man Reindeer.

The decrepit horse which Petruchio rides to his wedding is a two-man reindeer, and later the principals make a journey on hobby horses. The scenery changes are accomplished by folding screens attached to a basic framework. The musical background leaps from a Shostakovich polka to what sounds like a Stephen Foster melody. The costumes seem to have come from a variety of periods. Courtiers herald arrivals with kazoos.

The production comes together in a somewhat collegiate mood, that is both jaunty and makeshift. Perfectionists may quarrel with many things about it. I rather enjoyed its informality.

Robust Performance.

Ralph Clanton gives a robust performance as the mercenary suitor, swashbuckling and stentorian, and clearly having fun in a manner that makes the play a trifle stuffy when he is offstage. He throws Claire Luce, as Katherina, around in such a wild manner that she would end up with a broken crown as well as couple of bent limbs, if she were not a trained dancer to begin with.

Miss Luce plays the Shrew as surely the worst tempered heiress of the countryside. There is no sign of a redeeming feature until she has been thoroughly chastened. This Katherina is the out and out butt of the joke, and the star makes no compromise with the character's rankling charmlessness.

Susan Douglas is a decorative Bianca, and Robert Quarry and George Roy Hill are most agreeable suitors for her hand. It is difficult to identify characters by name, but it would seem that David Lewis and Dion Allen are particularly helpful with the comic spirit, and Larry Gates is outstandingly at home as Sly.

Frederic Warriner got a lusty round of applause last night for a brief appearance as the Tailor, in an extraordinary characterization.

A memo is due Nellie Forbush, occasionally identified as Mary Martin, that the tall, handsome Huntsman, occasionally identified as her son, Larry Hageman, acquitted himself most professionally.

"THE TAMING OF THE SHREW"

Play by William Shakespeare; staged by Margaret Webster; settings by Ben Edwards; costumes by Emeline Roche; executive producer, George Schaefer; presented by Maurice Evans, artistic supervisor, and the New York City Theatre Company at the New York City Center, April 25, 1951. The cast:

Christopher Sly	Larry Gates
A Tapster	Frank Corsaro
A Lord	Robert Pastene
A Huntsman	Larry Hageman
Bartholomew	John Glennon
Lucentio	Robert Quarry
Tranio	David Lewis
Baptista	John Straub
Gremio	Thayer David
Hortensio	George Roy Hill
Katherina	Claire Luce
Bianca	Susan Douglas
Biondello	Herbert Coleman
Petruchio	Ralph Clanton
Grumio	Dion Allen
Curtis	Nancy Marchand
A Pedant	Don Somers
A Haberdasher	Theodore Tenley
A Tailor	Frederic Warriner
Vincentio	Reynolds Evans
An Officer	Edmund Cambridge
A Widow	Cavada Humphrey

DAILY NEWS

April 26, 1951

Miss Webster's Light-Hearted 'Taming of Shrew' at the Center

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The City Center's Spring season of comedy had a nice beginning last evening with Margaret Webster's light-hearted production of "The Taming of the Shrew." This farce is broadly played, for it was broadly written, and it is evidence that Miss Webster is no slouch at staging slapstick.

An interesting company has rallied for the municipal revels, with Ralph Clanton and Claire Luce heading the roster in the roles of Petruchio and Katherina. Mr. Clanton is a big man with a big voice and quite a lot of acting style, and both he and Miss Luce have caught Shakespeare's notion that a shrew needs a lot of taming. She must be worn down mentally, as the Communists do it in "Darkness at Noon," and she also must be beaten regularly, like a gong, as Noel Coward advised in "Private Lives." Some of the encounters between Mr. Clanton and his ash-blonde opponent are a first-class athletic contest — and satisfying lowdown comedy.

Carefully Prepared.

The play is scheduled for only two weeks at the City Center, yet it shows careful work. The settings, by Ben Edwards, are excellent, and so are Emeline Roche's costumes. The players have a happy spirit and they are well rehearsed. They succeed in making "The Taming of the Shrew" all of a piece, which could not have been said of Olivia de Havilland's much more pretentious "Romeo and Juliet."

In the company are Susan Douglas as a sweet and attractive Bianca; Larry Gates, as a Christopher Sly right off the drunkards' dream street, Third Avenue; Reynolds Evans, as the noble Vincentio, and Dion Allen and Nancy Marchand as a pair of clowning servants. Then there are Robert Quarry and John Straub as a pair of Bianca's suitors. Young Herbert Coleman does excellently in the role of a page, and Frederick Warriner scores quickly and decisively in a bit as a lady's tailor. Appearing modestly and pleasantly in a couple of very minor roles is Larry Hageman, the handsome big son of Mary Martin.

"Kate" Good, Too.

"The Taming of the Shrew" is enjoyable almost any way it is played. I remember how well I liked it when, a good many years ago, Basil Sydney and Mary Ellis played it in modern dress in what is now the Ed Sullivan Theatre (formerly Maxine Elliott's). I remember how well I like it every time I see it played as "Kiss Me, Kate."

Miss Webster herself nods prettily to "Kiss Me, Kate" now and again, permitting various members of the company a snatch of a Cole Porter song for an exit or offstage line. And why not? Sam and Bella Spewack and Mr. Porter have improved Shakespeare quite a bit in their musical—principally by throwing out most of the scenes between Bianca and her suitors and getting down to the starving and beating of the bride.

It's a man play, men.

Now I must go. Told my wife I'd be right home after work.

New York Post

April 26, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

Shakespeare Without Cole Porter

In the long view of history, it is likely that William Shakespeare will bulk as a more important man of the theater than Cole Porter, but I am forced to admit that Mr. Porter's "Kiss Me Kate" is a better show than Mr. Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew." Nevertheless, the Shakespearean antic upon which the Porter musical comedy is based was quite pleasantly revived at the City Center last night, with Ralph Clanton roaring and swaggering his way through the role of Petruchio and Claire Luce taking her beating gamely as the vanquished Katherina.

Since Margaret Webster, one of the Bard's most understanding friends, staged the current version of "The Taming of the Shrew," the Elizabethan farce has a lot of liveliness and vitality. The melancholy truth is that it isn't a prodigiously funny play these days, and it requires all the aid it can get in the way of good, slapstick music-hall clowning to make it really satisfactory entertainment. Because Miss Luce, Mr. Clanton and most of their associates are high-spirited performers, the needed gayety is for much of the time forthcoming.

The Fun

This certainly isn't as brilliantly delightful a performance of the play as Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne offered some years ago, and it hasn't the bright originality that Basil Sydney and Mary Ellis brought to their modern-clothes version back in the days when most current playgoers were in their swaddling clothes. Indeed, I should say that it is brilliance that the current revival lacks. But it wisely never takes itself too seriously, and, although there is occasionally more laughter on the stage than in the audience, it can be pretty good fun.

For one thing, the rather extraneous episode of Christopher Sly, the drunken tinker, is agreeably managed. It has always seemed to me a pity that Shakespeare didn't make a full-length comedy out of the story of the alcoholic Christopher, who is fooled by some elaborate practical jokers into believing that he is a wealthy and roistering lord. Miss Webster has wisely presented the incident at sufficient length, and, with Larry Gates playing the role with engaging gusto, the Christopher Sly scenes are the most entertaining of the evening.

Sub-Plot

On the other hand, I could have dispensed with a considerable part of the narrative concerning the wooing of Kate's sister, the gentle Bianca. To me, this has always been one of the most obscure and mystifying subplots in the annals of classic comedy, and, although it is well-enough played in the City Center prodction, I suspect that it adds exactly nothing to the hilarity of the proceedings. I must say that I was considerably happier when Miss Webster, in a brightly irreverent moment, had Mr. Clanton start singing one of the "Kiss Me Kate" songs.

It was my impression that Miss Luce made Kate just a little bit too shrilly sullen in her earlier moments, but, once she started in on the process of being tamed, she was on much surer ground. I thought that she even got away with that curiously embarrassing last-act scene of the shrew's abject recantation. Mr. Clanton, whose Octavius to Miss Cornell's Cleopatra was a memorable perfomance, is a good, if not equally memorable, Petruchio. I can't say that "The Taming of the Shrew" is the funniest show in town, but it still has its points.

Journal-American

April 26, 1951

Hageman Is Fine, The Rest Ineffective

By ROBERT GARLAND

If the makers of theatre history books remember last night at all, they'll remember it as the night on which Mary Martin's son made his Broadway debut. For, if it was anybody's night at the City Center of Music and Drama, it was young Larry Hageman's. He appeared twice: first as a Huntsman, second as a Servant of Petruchio.

As you must have guessed, Mr. Hageman was part of William Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew." And William Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew" was—and is, for that matter—a sort of revival of Margaret Webster's barnstorming production which has been playing the colleges and clubs whenever they would let it in.

He—Larry Hageman, not William Shakespeare—is the talented lad who recently made a recording of "You're Just in Love," with his mother. And, on the other side, "Get Out Those Old Records." The first song is from Ethel Merman's show; the second song is an original. They're excellent as Mary Martin and her son do them.

Well, he acts as well as he sings. And he's so much better than most of the others that it's embarrassing. If he had someone to direct him in and out of the distracting makeshift scenery, he might be even better than he is. I'm sure he would!

* * *

Just Another Woman

It has long been my belief that Katherina isn't a termagant at all. To the contrary. She's merely another woman who wants her own way. Wanting her own way, she proceeds to get it by pretending to be the tamed rather than the tamer. It's an earlier version, then, of "What Every Woman Knows." It also can be amusing.

Surely Patricia Morison was aware of this when she was Bianca's more clever sister in "Kiss Me, Kate." If you didn't sense it all the time, you saw it in "I Hate Men" when she sang. And, although Cole Porter's musical was "The Taming of the Shrew" without the Christopher Sly framework, the woman-always-wins attitude was there.

And that, I seem to recall, is the way Claire Luce played Katherina 10 years ago in London. An outdoor performance in Regent's Park, Miss Luce took it as seriously as a libretto. And that's as seriously as William Shakespeare did. It's good, unclean fun. It always has been, even before the Bard-of-Avon carelessly rewrote it.

But they project it so erratically at the City Center that you don't know what it is. So "The Taming of the Shrew" that comes out is a muddled mixup. It's not even good enough to be put back on Margaret Webster's wagon and hauled away. I'd let it lay.

* * *

Is Ineffective

The chief offenders are at the very top. At the very top of the billing, that is. Claire Luce and Ralph Clanton are the stars. Miss Luce is—or was—an actress of parts. She has been admired in "The Gay Divorcee," which was musical-comedy, and "Of Mice and Men," which was non-musical tragedy. She has led an orchestra.

But, as Katherina, she is ineffective. She needs someone to untie and then direct her. So does Mr. Clanton, her Petruchio. Like Douglas Watson as Romeo, he is a disappointment. These youngsters think that, when they're acting in television or on a larger screen, they're really getting somewhere.

The others aren't good, either. All the way down the line. Susan Douglas as Bianca, Reynolds Evans as An Officer, Larry Gates as Christopher Sly and David Lewis as Tranio are featured. Except perhaps for Mr. Gates, I can't imagine why. They're merely part of the inconsequentiality of it all. It just isn't worth your while.

That's why I say that if theatre history books remember last night at all, they'll remember it was the night on which Mary Martin's son, Larry Hageman, made his Broadway debut. His Huntsman and his Servant of Petrucio are sterling. And memorable in their way.